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It's no longer enough for retailers to have arresting window displays - stores can now

communicate and interact with their customers before they even enter the store. Going by the evocative name of Whispering Windows, this technology has been tested in the past few months by several big name brands in high-profile campaigns.

The Whispering Windows' phenomenon grew out of a business partnership between FeONIC plc (formerly Newlands Scientific) and scientists working at Hull University on applications of smart materials that communicate sound. Out of this came products such as the Soundbug, which plugs into a stereo and turns window into speaker, and Omnivox (the professional version of it). 'In 2003, we moved our focus to being benefit rather than just product-orientated,' says Brian Smith, managing director of FeONIC. 'The result was that we developed the ability to send a message from a store to the pavement.'

The first retailer to use Whispering Windows was Peter Jones last summer (see case study). First off the mark to use the technology as part of a sales campaign was



WORD ON THE STREET

Store windows have always been an advert for what's inside, and now that visual experience has an added audio dimension, explains Michele Witthaus



Lunn Poly, which used Whispering Windows in its main turn-of-year campaign. Design and development manager Doug Glenwright explains: 'We had discovered that about 85 per cent of all people walking past our shops weren't looking in the window at all, and we had between three and 17 seconds to convert those that did look into walk-ins. The real objective of Whispering Windows was to talk directly to customers as they walked past, communicate our key messages and make them stop in their tracks. More than that, we wanted to make them come through the door and book a holiday.'

Remote Media, a strategic partner with FeONIC plc, designed multisensory Whispering Windows for Lunn Poly. Says Remote Media CEO Jason Cremins: 'We used sound interactively to let people know that when they walked past the window, they were actually causing the system to operate. The lighting in turn changed as people approached. It's a multisensory approach to communicating with people on the street.'

Out of a total budget of £11m on the Lunn Poly campaign (across 800 stores), Whispering Windows represented a minimal investment, says Glenwright (it was in

only six stores). He says Lunn Poly was pleasantly surprised by the impact of the technology on footfall and bookings in participating shops. 'Due to those results, we are now looking at rolling out to a larger number of shops.'

Last October, Marks & Spencer Money used Whispering Windows in 10 stores to support the launch of its new combined credit and loyalty card. The technology was part of a multifaceted campaign that included television advertising, direct marketing and in-store graphics.

Customers passing the stores triggered the windows to play the theme tune to the campaign. According to a spokesperson for Marks & Spencer Money, the aim was to raise awareness of the window displays, ensuring that sound levels attracted attention without being intrusive.

There are some clear trends emerging from the use of Whispering Windows, says FeONIC's Smith: 'We're noticing significant interest from retail service providers - travel stores and mobile phone stores where you can interact rather than just buy products, also car showrooms, which are interested in an after-hours opportunity.'

He says that new users are particularly interested in a rental model geared for short campaigns of one to three weeks. 'A store will pay according to how many windows it wants to install the technology in and what is involved in setting it up.'

Jason Cremins says Remote Media's research shows that short runs are most effective: 'It's very much a campaign-based technology. We've found that response tails off over time and it becomes almost like audio wallpaper. You have to be in a position to either move the installations around different stores to keep the level of excitement up or have a multitude of different offers and campaigns to keep it fresh.'

He has ambitious goals for the future of the technology. 'Whispering Windows grabs attention and we want to reinforce that message, whether with a plasma screen that shows content or lighting up individual mannequins in a window. A final extension is that you could make the window fully interactive by putting a touch pad or a membrane behind the glass so that the individual can control the experience,' he says. ▸



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Right, Whispering Windows by FeONIC at Peter Jones in a TV screen display. Watch and listen out for it playing the European Championships this summer

Case study: Whispering Windows in Peter Jones

The John Lewis Partnership is enthusiastic about the crowd-pulling potential of Whispering Windows, following its use of the windows in a major campaign last summer. The Peter Jones store wanted to communicate the final stages of a four-year makeover to its customers and the wider public. In June 2003, Whispering Windows were installed in all its large windows from the Kings Road to Sloane Square.

Peter Jones' visual merchandising manager Kevin Scully explains: 'We had about 27 plasma screens, ranging from small to very large. We then played a video so we had the same imagery on all the screens. At the same time, each massive pane of glass was connected to Whispering Windows to pipe music on to the pavement.'

Although the store had anticipated something of a buzz arising from this ground-breaking display, the extent of the reaction was beyond expectation, says Scully. 'The response from customers was amazing. It was absolutely extraordinary how many people stopped and responded to the windows. One particular vignette stands out: a man who was

How it works

Sensors on the window vibrate, turning the whole sheet of glass into a giant speaker unit.

The sensors can monitor passing traffic and transmit particular messages when people approach.

Academics at Hull University developed the technology while working in the field of magnetostriction, the phenomenon behind Whispering Windows.

The smart material at the heart of the device was originally developed for the American navy, to create sonar signals underwater.

The secret of the technology is a very high-power density material. When excited in an inductive field, this material changes shape, giving rise to its capacity to transmit sound.

A single Whispering Windows installation will cost £3,000-£10,000, depending on the size and duration of the installation.

Clients: Peter Jones, John Lewis plc, Lunn Poly, Marks & Spencer.

Lunn Poly is now using it in all its new branch and relocation openings.

A big launch (with animatronics) is on the horizon in the children's toy sector.



driving past on a street-cleaning buggy put his brakes on, got off, put his ear to the window, smiled and got back on.'

The success of the Peter Jones' experience prompted John Lewis to use Whispering Windows in the autumn, when it launched its first-ever television advertising campaign. 'As soon as the ad went out we installed it in six of the branches. It ran for the full six weeks of the campaign.'

Scully says that the length of this particular campaign using Whispering Windows allowed John Lewis to monitor various aspects of people's reactions. 'After a couple of weeks, response did seem to drop off. However, we found that people were still stopping and looking at the window. We monitored the response of customers walking

past the window when the music was playing and when it wasn't. There was something like 75 per cent head-turn when the music was playing.'

John Lewis has introduced Whispering Windows to its events around London Fashion Week, with catwalk music piped on to the street to accompany window displays of models. In addition, football fans will be pleased to find screens playing Euro matches and transmitting them to the street.

And this summer Peter Jones will be using the windows again to mark the end of its four-year renovation. 'We open the final part of the project in June and, for our pre-opening windows, we want to use the technology to send a message to our customers,' says Scully [R](#)